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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on changes in the practicum component of a teacher education program, designed to provide experiences related to the systemic functions of schools. The practicum evolved from genuine collaboration between a school and a university to share responsibility for preservice preparation. The program involved having the teacher educator move into the school with a group of 12-15 student teachers for 12 weeks and conduct the preservice program (both theoretical and practical components) in the school setting. A major purpose was to give student teachers a school experience, rather than just a classroom experience; there is widespread agreement that it better prepared student teachers for the systemic demands of teaching. Program issues are discussed, including the extent of learning versus socialization that takes place. Experience with this program indicates some directions for universities to consider when reviewing their preservice programs, such as: the time demands for university staff to be in schools and the low status accorded to these activities among faculties of education, the potential of the practicum for providing powerful educative experiences for young teachers, the importance of addressing systemic issues, and the need to encourage preservice teachers to develop a commitment to career-long learning. (JDD)

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Rethinking the way the practicum contributes to learning to teach

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Rethinking the way the practicum contributes to learning to teach

Introduction

Few pleas to consider and clarify our vision and purposes for teacher education have had the impact of Fenstermacher's (1992) address to the AACTE annual meeting. Distinguishing between the systemic functions and educative functions of schooling highlights a fundamental dilemma when considering the purposes of teacher education. Metaphors for preparing teachers such as "training", "apprenticeship", socialization", "education" and "theory and practice" components reflect our attempts at striking a balance between teacher learning to function effectively in schools as they exist, or transforming and improving existing situations. The systemic-educative distinction crystallizes basic concerns for teacher education and highlights the challenges which must be considered. In this paper I will report on some changes to the practicum component of a teacher education program which were designed to provide experiences related to the systemic functions of schools. Addressing this issue focuses attention on the way people learn to teach and the importance of school experience in teacher preparation. Finally, the paper returns to the relationship between systemic and educative priorities in teacher education and whether universities are appropriate centres in which to develop preservice programs to deal with these priorities effectively.

A critical event

The scene is a seminar with school representatives late in an afternoon session. The discussion has moved to tertiary-school relationships in teacher education and a comment from one principal seems to echo a widely accepted observation being made of first year teachers.

> *"They are fine people, know their 'stuff', but do not know about schools and what they have to do as teachers".*

It is late in the afternoon and criticism of preservice education is not new. My response is terse.

> *"How are they expected to know how to function in schools ... it won't happen with lectures and seminars at a university ... perhaps schools have to play a greater part in conveying the day to day responsibilities of teachers."*

The interaction now follows a familiar path with a principal stating

> *"We take student teachers for teaching rounds .. what more can we do?"*

My response is feeble

> *"Perhaps we should collaborate more in what happens in the school experience ... too often it focuses on the ability to perform in a classroom ... other opportunities should be available. Perhaps I should live in the school with the student teachers ... perhaps more of the teacher education program should be in the school setting."*

These vague ideas may have been the signal to conclude the seminar and I was left with an unsatisfactory solution to a familiar area of concern.

I later realised I had underestimated this principal. Two hours later he sought me out to follow up the earlier exchange. In Fenstermacher's (1992) terms he was concerned that new teachers were not prepared for the systemics of schooling and this limited their effectiveness and future development. What did I mean by greater collaboration? What more could the school do? Was I serious in offering to "live in the school" with the student teachers? For the first time my rhetoric was being tested. The outcome was a proposal for me to move into the school with a group of 12-15 student teachers for 12 weeks and conduct the preservice program (both theoretical and practical components) in the school setting. One month later the principal rang to invite me to the school to arrange the details of the program with the school staff. For seven years, genuine collaboration has occurred between that school (and since then five other schools) and the university in sharing responsibility for preservice preparation. This collaboration has included school staff participation in the preservice program and a specific school program over the 12 weeks which responds to the needs of the student teachers.

Learning from the extended school experience

The extended school experience has been a small but important feature of the preservice program. A major purpose is to give student teachers a school, rather than classroom, experience and address many of the systemic aspects of schooling. The time demands for both university staff and student teachers have meant that it has been a voluntary option within the program, with ten percent of student teachers, and one or two staff committed to the school based alternative each year.

The school-based alternative has been the subject of several evaluation studies (Northfield, 1994) and there is widespread agreement that it better prepares student teachers for the systemic demands of teaching. However it remains a marginal activity within the constraints of a university course. One evaluation study (Kushner, 1988) focussed closely on the different learning outcomes emerging from this period of time in the school setting.

Kushner "lived" in the school setting and his report raised a number of issues about the impact of this extended practicum experience on student teachers.

- *Learning or socialization?* Does an extended school experience of this type lead students to merely conform to the culture of the school? Is this what the principal (see previous section) was really trying to achieve? The extended school experience provides opportunities which will only form an educative experience if the supervising staff continue to pose challenges and questions about the school setting. As the university staff member responsible for student teacher development, the author had to learn about and adopt a very different role and approach to supervision compared with the shorter teaching experiences.

  If preservice programs are to address the systemic areas of schooling it will require those responsible for student teacher learning to develop more extended roles in the school setting and university priorities make such roles difficult to establish and maintain.

- *What can be achieved at preservice level?* Does the success of the extended school based experience confirm the view that existing preservice programs are not able to deal with important systemic issues for new teachers? The evaluation studies have consistently shown a high level of satisfaction among student teacher and school participants in the school based program. The student teachers have participated in all aspects of the teacher role and subsequent teacher education course components can be introduced and discussed with a broader, more valid school experience, as a starting point.

  Linking this extended experience to course requirements and maintaining close supervision contact in the school is necessary if we are to see preservice as developing teachers who can critically reflect on their experience, rather than "apprentices" getting to know existing practices.

The school based experience indicates some directions for universities to consider when reviewing their preservice programs (Northfield, 1994). The seven year experience also shows that the effort to address systemic concerns and provide a more valid school experience remains a marginal pilot experience limited by the constraints of university expectations for staff. The time demands for university staff to be in schools is beyond reasonable expectations when other academic requirements are considered. To deal with

systemic issues at preservice level may be beyond what is possible in the university context. To address these issues will certainly require a major increase in time and commitment. It will also change the way university staff collaborate with, and work in, schools.

A personal observation

Twenty five years of experience in teacher education lead me to make the following two related propositions. Firstly, as teacher educators, we tend to overestimate what we can show and tell in a transmissive way in both preservice and inservice settings. Secondly, we underestimate the types of experiences we can provide to foster student teacher learning about teaching.

One implication of these propositions for responding to the systemic challenges of teacher education, is that experience based opportunities appear to be essential. The principal in the previous anecdote rightly pointed out deficiencies in the preparation of teachers and offered a genuine school-tertiary institution collaboration. This allowed young teachers to experience the way a school is organised in addition to the concentration on the classroom experiences, which is the typical emphasis in practicum programs. The best of lectures and seminars on campus cannot convey the structure, organisation and dailiness of schools, yet student teachers will need to understand these aspects if they are to become teachers who do not merely accept, and conform to, the present situation.

However, universities tend to be organised for transmissive modes of teaching and learning, setting constraints on the possibilities for helping student teachers learn to teach.

The potential of the practicum

We should not underestimate the potential of the practicum for providing powerful educative experiences for young teachers. Consider these extracts from a case study of a practicum experience prepared by Donna, a student teacher preparing to be a secondary science teacher. She is undertaking a one year teacher education course after completing a science degree.

> *This is a PEEL classroom, PEEL being the Project to Enhance Effective Learning whose major aim is the promotion of independent learning by students through changes in teachers' attitudes and teaching methods. So these notes are class handouts - text covering the material I had been assigned to teach interspersed with "thinking tasks" designed to encourage revision, further questions and comments, and connections to other content ....*

> *The difficulty is that I don't know what to do next. The students have all the information they need in front of them, and there doesn't seem to be much left for me to do. I feel obsolete, unnecessarily, superfluous. I wish I'd learnt to tap dance ... I find for all my excellent training, my subconscious view of the role of the teacher is still purely to stand up and impart irrefutable truths ...."*
>
> (Fox, 1994)

Donna successfully met the challenge of classroom demands which initially conflicted with her expectations of teaching. She had a supervisor who believed that the experience would lead to significant learning and provided the support and guidance to deal with the situation. She developed confidence in her students and used their experiences and significant understanding of the topic to complete a personally satisfying lesson. In doing so she continued to significantly reshape her view of teaching and learning. Her case reminds the staff responsible for her preservice program that we ask a great deal of the new teachers. As teacher educators we take people with a self-image developed from academic success, which resulted in expertise in particular discipline areas. For Donna, and others in our program, we appear to devalue this expertise in the way we present teaching and learning. In fact this is part of the transition from successful learner to a person who has to now take responsibility for the learning of others. The issues associated with this transition are likely to be best tackled as part of school experience rather than on campus. The approach to teacher education being advocated for Donna can be described as developing a view of teaching from a close consideration of the learning of both school students and student teachers. When, and if, new teachers begin to accept, what has been described as a constructivist view of learning and implications for teaching, they attribute the development of their perspectives to powerful experiences in schools (and more rarely on campus) and opportunities to clarify ideas with colleagues (Gunstone, Slattery and Baird, 1989).

What is possible?

I would argue that it is possible to organise a preservice program that begins to address the systemic and educative needs of intending teachers. However it is clear that the collaboration with schools and the nature of the school and campus experience required is difficult to arrange in a university context. Involvement in preservice education often has low status in Faculties of Education and in the University as a whole. Expecting staff to spend the necessary large amounts of contact time in campus workshop, seminar and individual student teacher reviews is likely to test their commitment and place them in

situations which are not likely to enhance their progress as academics. To also ask staff to engage in genuine collaboration with schools and spend extended time periods in school settings will certainly be seen to jeopardise their academic careers, unless the tertiary institution has an unusually high commitment to teacher education approaches of this type.

Without genuine collaboration, teacher educator time, and acceptance of the potential for student teacher learning in the school setting, any progress in learning about systemic factors will be minimal. I would also argue that development in the educative functions of teaching should be based on school experiences. Extended time in school experience alone is likely to result in socialisation, not the beginning of education about teaching. Fenstermacher (1992) is questioning what we can achieve at preservice level, given the constraints, and his proposal argues for preservice education to be part of a career long learning process for teachers. This latter aspiration will be widely shared in rhetoric if not in practice. The Fenstermacher idea would seem to fit comfortably with an induction/ probation period and a requirement to complete further work in teacher education and I am not confident that teacher education programs will always be maintained. However, professional development opportunities for teachers are too often the first areas to be reduced in times of resource cutbacks for education. In the absence of such career requirements it would seem even more important for the preservice program to encourage a commitment to, and provide guidance for, career long learning.

I hope the Fenstermacher paper is not interpreted as giving a more limited role for universities in preservice education. Preservice education can be described as a course presented at the wrong time (before participants understand schools and schooling) in the wrong place (in universities with associated constraints) for too little time. The paper represents a challenge for each institution to state what it wishes to accomplish and where it is going. For me, the preservice program can address systemic and educative issues of teaching. However, we should not underestimate the challenges of developing a coherent view of teacher learning within the constraints that university expectations place on forming genuine partnerships with schools and providing significant experiences in school settings.

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